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ABSTRACT

A study traced the discourse control of one writer, over 3 years, from his basic writing course to his junior year "membership" in academia. It reported on the student's transitions in areas of print code control in 28 writing tasks from 6 classes covering 3 disciplines. The analysis involved 38 error patterns, including spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. Results indicated that the learning process of basic writers is not pristine or predictable, and that there are no easy answers or obvious patterns. Results showed that none of the error patterns disappeared as a result of remediation and the developmental writing course; only the errors of run-on sentences and sentence fragments appeared to decrease. Results suggest that formal grammar instruction has little to do with the student's quality of writing, and that teachers, therefore, should not spend so much time teaching grammar. Individual and workshop instruction, as well as holistic evaluation, are recommended. (Two figures and a table of data are included.) (PRA)

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Grammatical Transitions: A Study of One Basic Writer

INTRODUCTION

Those who teach basic writing find it a challenging experience to say the least. In fact, working with college level students who have had little exposure to the written word and who are unacquainted with the expectations of an academic audience may, at times, even seem an overwhelming task. The challenge that exists for the basic writing teacher is to determine how best to remediate these students. This paper assumes that understanding more about discursive transitions of basic writers can lead to improved means of working with them--perhaps even to a set of criteria for improving developmental programs.

The purpose of the present study was to trace the discourse control of one writer over three years from his basic writing course to his junior year "membership" in academia. Specifically the paper reports on the student's transitions in areas of print code control in twenty-eight writing tasks from six classes covering three disciplines. The analysis involves thirty-eight error patterns, including spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. The specific writing tasks used in this analysis are shown below in Figure 1.1:

Course	Task Number	Task Description
Developmental Comp	1	In-class Diagnostic Essay
	2	Out-of-Class Essay
	3	Out-of-Class Essay
	4	Out-of-Class Essay
	5	Out-of-Class Essay
	6	In-Class Essay
	7	In-Class Essay
	8	In-Class Final
Beginning Comp	9	Out-of-Class Essay
	10	In-Class Essay

Course	Task Number	Task Description
	11	Out-of Class Essay
	12	Out-of-Class Essay
Second-level Comp	13	Out-of-Class Essay
	14	Out-of-Class Essay
	15	In-Class Essay
	16	In-Class Essay
	17	Documented Project
	18	In-Class Final
Technical Writing	19	Memo
	20	Memo
	21	Claim Letter
	22	Information Response Letter
	23	Resume
	24	Abstract Report
	25	Descriptive Mechanism Report
	26	Feasibility Study
U.S. History	27	In-Class Final
U.S. Government	28	In-Class Mid-term

Fig. 1.1 Each of 28 Writing Tasks Examined for This Study

As I trace the writer's development (or even lack of it) over this three year period, I will explore two questions: 1) What do the overall findings of the analysis reveal? 2) How do individual error patterns show growth? After presenting these results, I speculate a bit on them, offering suggestions and implications for composition teaching.

METHODOLOGY

I borrowed the model used for this analysis from Connors and Lunsford. They examined 3,000 randomly chosen college essays from all across America in order to draw conclusions about the most common patterns of student writing errors being made in the 1980s (396). They derived from this examination a list of 36 error patterns that had occurred four or more times. It is this

model that I utilize for my analysis including also a section for extraneous commas and one for the misuse of their/there. This expanded error pattern list is shown in Figure 1.2:

Error or Error Pattern

Spelling
No comma after introductory element
Comma splice
Wrong word
Lack of possessive apostrophe
Vague pronoun reference
No comma in compound sentence
Pronoun agreement
Sentence fragment
No comma in non-restrictive phrase
Subject-verb agreement
Unnecessary comma with restrictive phrase
Unnecessary words
Wrong tense
Dangling or misplaced modifier
Run-on sentence
Wrong or missing preposition
Lack of comma in series
Its/It's error
Tense shift
Pronoun shift/point of view shift
Wrong/missing inflected endings
Comma with quotation marks error
Missing words
Capitalization
"Which/that" for "who/whom"
Unidiomatic word use
Comma between subject and verb
Unnecessary apostrophe after "s"
Unnecessary comma in complex sentence
Hyphenation errors
Comma before direct object
Unidiomatic sentence pattern
Title underlining
Garbled sentence
Adjectival for adverbial form--"ly"
Their/there error
Extraneous commas

Fig. 2.1 An Expanded List of Connors and Lunsford's Errors

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

Overall Findings

The writer's errors over the course of the three years from this error analysis chart are shown in Table 1.1:

Table 1.1

Errors per 100 Words Over Three Years Using the Expanded 38 Error List

Writing Tasks	Errors per 100 Words
1	11.65
2	10.09
3	5.51
4	8.98
5	4.29
6	8.62
7	11.01
8	5.11
9	4.27
10	7.60
11	7.50
12	4.88
13	3.03
14	4.82
15	2.75
16	3.02
17	2.61
18	3.45
19	2.27
20	4.32
21	4.19
22	7.43
23	5.07
24	6.31
25	2.31
26	5.65
27	10.47
28	10.12

No clear pattern is evident. The results are erratic at best. For instance, note that the first essay had the highest error frequency per 100 words of any of the twenty-eight essays--11.65. And, encouragingly, four essays later the error frequency per 100 words is 4.29. However, on essay 7, the frequency of error soars back to 11.01 errors per 100 words. And this roller coaster trend

persists throughout the three year period. Additional evidence of this trend can be seen in the writer's sophomore year. During the first semester, one of his essays had only 2.61 errors per 100 words. This would seem to reflect remarkable growth. The following semester, however, one of his essay exams contained a distressingly high 10.47 errors per 100 words.

An Examination of Error Patterns

As I conducted my research, I was curious to discover if frequency of certain errors diminished after remediation; i.e., although overall his errors seem to have a roller coaster effect, perhaps certain individual errors might show progress. I traced the writer's development in six different areas--spelling, punctuation (extraneous commas, comma splices), fragments, run-on sentences, garbled sentences, and unidiomatic sentence patterns. Although my initial inclination was that error patterns should disappear upon remediation, none of the error patterns disappeared as a result of the developmental writing course. In fact, all six patterns persist into the writer's sophomore year, and four (spelling,punctuation, garbled sentences, unidiomatic sentence patterns) are still with him as a junior. Because fragments and run-on sentences appear to cease to be a problem unlike the other four error patterns, I would like to examine them more closely at this time.

Run-on Sentences

Run-on sentences vanish after the developmental writing course with one exception. Significantly, after lying dormant for three semesters, they resurface on the history final exam. In fact, five run-on sentences appear in this essay--more than on any other essay in the corpus. It should also be noted that the error frequency rate on this writing task is the third highest for the entire corpus--10.47. Since this is a semester final exam, the element

that stress may have played in this unusually high error rate cannot be overlooked.

This phenomenon of increased error under stress is acknowledged by Whiteman and Krashen. Whiteman discusses dialect influence in writing and explains that "under conditions of special stress," student writers may revert back to using old and inappropriate dialect patterns in their essays (163). Krashen concurs, explaining that when students are asked to produce language that is merely learned rather than acquired, they may "fall back" on acquired language patterns because they have "not yet acquired enough of the second language to initiate the utterance they want" (174). In other words, under stress, basic writers may discard grammatical rules that have been learned in favor of acquired language patterns that are inappropriate as written language. Thus, while run-on sentences may not be occuring regularly in the student's writing, this may not mean that this problem has been corrected. Clearly, the tendency is always there for them to resurface--especially when confronted with writing tasks that place the writer in a situation of stress.

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments occur throughout the writer's sophomore year. In developmental writing he averages .36 fragments per 100 words. In beginning composition the average is .24, and in second-level composition it drops to .19. The history exam contains three fragments, for an average of .27 fragments per 100 words. In the student's junior year the fragments vanish; even the government exam is fragment free.

I am not sure this is evidence of remarkable progress although it may be. There are essays previous to the government exam (seven, in fact) that remain free of fragments--five of these are in-class pieces. But, the problem

continues to resurface in subsequent essays. How, then, does one explain the complete absence of fragments in all eight of the writing tasks for technical writing? Actually, these tasks are not entirely fragment free, but in some technical writing contexts fragments are conventional. Possibly this convention allows for the writer's own weaknesses. Because of these extenuating circumstances, I am not sure that hard and fast conclusions can be drawn here about specific levels of improvement. In fact, the number of fragments that occurs in previous essays does not suggest that it is a diminished problem. Even the types of fragments that the student makes are curious and confusing, and there is simply no pattern to the kinds of fragments that he makes either. My guess would be that his fragment problem is lurking just beneath the surface, ready to reappear in future writing tasks that he undertakes.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Classroom Instruction

Clearly, there is a lack of clear growth in areas of grammar over the three year period examined here--and this despite specific classroom instruction concerning grammatical issues in the student's developmental writing and beginning composition classes. Certainly there may be a place for grammatical instruction in the classroom, but the above results indicate that such instruction may not produce any significant results. In fact, Hartwell theorizes that "formal grammar instruction" has little to do with "control over surface correctness" or with "quality of writing" (125). If this is true and if this student is representative of other basic writers, then this raises significant questions about the amount of time we as teachers may spend teaching grammar--especially since there are other significant areas that deserve classroom instruction. Issues of coherence and explicitness

are more global features of language and harder to teach, but they deserve classroom time as well.

Individual Instruction

Another implication drawn from the results of this study concerns classroom lecture versus other pedagogical techniques. From the results of this analysis it has been established that there is no one clear pattern throughout this three year period. If this student is representative of other basic writers, then how does one teach to an entire class, all displaying somewhat inconsistent and unpredictable patterns of growth? Without diminishing the importance of sound classroom instruction, I believe this trend of diversity and unpredictability among students justifies the use of workshops in class and individual conferences with students. Decentering the teacher and placing students in a position of preeminence seems the only way to address the special and diverse needs of writers, especially developmental ones. When such individual attention is given, the instructor is able to address specifically the students' areas of weakness--and this subsequently sets up a situation conducive to growth.

Holistic Evaluation of Student Papers

If teaching formal grammar is not a catalyst for significant growth in students' writing tasks, then emphasizing mechanical breakdowns when evaluating papers may also fail to prove fruitful. I do not intend to underestimate the distraction that errors have on an academic audience attempting to make sense of an essay. And I concur with Shaughnessy who explains that errors are "unprofitable intrusions upon the unconsciousness of the reader" that "demand energy without giving any return in meaning..." (12). Even

still, merely going through students' essays and marking mechanical breakdowns and counting errors is simply not going to produce any difference in future essays, if the results of study are accurate. Even Shaughnessy deplores such an approach to evaluating essays and urges teachers to see the intelligence of their students' mistakes (11). In other words, errors need to be seen as a natural part of the writing process of basic writers as they learn to adjust to the expectations of an academic audience (Falk 441).

Instead of a particle approach to evaluation where "isolated aspects of written form" are emphasized (Falk 439), I would concur with both Falk and Shuy who point out that since the natural acquisition of language is holistic, instructors should both teach and evaluate language holistically. To be sure, considering not only grammatical issues, but also language features such as coherence, cohesion, and explicitness makes the evaluation process more difficult, but this approach is more enlightening. Whereas a specific pattern of growth may not be evident when counting errors, growth may be clearly discernible when "beneath the surface" issues are examined expecially over a period of time (Shuy 104). In other words, the true extent of a student's progress may be missed if we merely count mistakes. Obviously, this approach requires more of a commitment, both of time and energy, on the part of the evaluator, but teachers who do this acquire a better understanding of their students and are better able to assist them in their development as writers.

CONCLUSION

For basic writers, learning to write is clearly not a pristeen or predictable process, and this fact is well supported by rhetoricians. For instance, Rose points out that error "is not something that, once fixed in a simple and clean environment, will never emerge again" (114). The results

of this present study certainly verify this. No easy answers are available when discussing the development of basic writers--few if any obvious patterns. Consequently, in our work with basic writers, commitment and patience must remain omnipotent.

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